



Contact: Teri Frady
(508) 495-2239

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NOAA APPROVES PROTECTION FOR DEEP-WATER HABITAT ***Canyon Closures Shield Fish and Cold-water Corals***

NOAA Fisheries Service officials today announced they will approve new rules that prevent future expansion of monkfishing into two submarine canyons on the southern edge of Georges Bank. The action protects hard-bottomed habitat in Lydonia and Oceanographer Canyons from disruption by monkfish gear, most of which is dragged along or anchored to the ocean bottom. The habitat is important to many fish, and is home to some 18 species of corals. NOAA expects the rule will be final and effective by early May. NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The canyons are two of the 15 cut into the continental shelf and slopewalls along the southern edge of Georges Bank, one of the world's most productive fishing grounds. Although monkfish vessels do not presently fish in these areas, other changes in the fishery management plan might encourage them to do so.

"We believe this preserves the balance between fishing and protection of important habitat," said NOAA Fisheries Service director Bill Hogarth. "We especially appreciate both the New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils' attention to this matter before a fishery expands in these areas."

The agency approved nine other adjustments to the monkfish plan, one of which creates an offshore fishery that could have operated in the canyon areas closed under the action announced today. The new rules also prevent monkfish trawlers in the fishery's southern management area from using gear rigged for efficient towing along very rocky or hard-bottomed areas, providing further protections to these habitats.

The agency disapproved a measure to allow a one-time revision of a fishing vessel's baseline description of its fishing power. This is important when considering a vessel's value. The agency also rejected the Councils' consideration and analysis of the plan's bycatch reporting methodology, and will be working with them to resolve shortcomings identified in recent litigation.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

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NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of the nation's coastal and marine resources.

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